

# From the People of Wisconsin

## Battleship *Wisconsin*'s Silver Service

by Joe Judge

In the 1890s the Navy emerged from a long period of slumber. The combination of new construction techniques and the willingness of the country to take on international responsibilities called for a modern fleet of steel cruisers and battleships. These were the ships that won the Spanish-American War and sailed around the world in 1907. Lithographs, postcards, magazines and books testify to the surging popularity of the American bluejacket and the new steel Navy.

Of course, a world power has to dress in dignity, especially on formal occasions. The Navy represented the nation, and the American battleship represented the Navy. The dreadnaughts of the era were traditionally named for states (and cruisers were named for cities). In the spirit of the times, American cities and states came forward in the 1890s with silver services for the new steel ships. Like the ships, these gleaming formal services were a reflection of national and local pride. Not all Navy ships of the period had silver services – it was not a requirement, but a custom. The practice had its heyday between 1890 and



*Battleship Wisconsin's silver service is now on display on the landing between the first and second floor of Nautilus, just outside the museum. (Photo by Greg Vick)*

was still under construction, the state legislature of Wisconsin voted to fund a silver service for the ship. The State also established a commission to plan appropriate ceremonies for the battleship's entry into the fleet. This commission was

also in charge of ordering the silver. It was the usual practice at the time to award the contract to an in-state jewelry firm. In 1899 the commissioners gave the contract to the C. Preusser Jewelry Co. of Milwaukee.

The Preusser Company did not actually manufacture the silver. It selected and ordered pieces

from a larger silver manufacturer. In this case, Preusser sub-contracted with the Gorham Company of Providence, Rhode Island. (Gorham had much experience with Navy presentation silver. The company made more than two dozen of these services between 1891 and 1907.) The state of

Wisconsin paid \$5,500 for a 35-piece set. It was placed aboard the battleship shortly after the ship's commissioning in 1901.

*Wisconsin's* silver is stamped "sterling." This word is an English term that means the metal is 92.5% pure silver. Silver in its pure form is very soft and has to be hardened by mixing with some other metal, usually copper, which makes up the other 7.5% of the metal. USS *Wisconsin's* silver used a historically significant hardening agent. A presentation plaque from the 1899 set carries the following inscription: "Presented / by the / People of Wisconsin / Cast from bronze fittings recovered from the wrecks of the Spanish / cruisers destroyed by the United States fleet near Santiago, Cuba / July 3, 1898." It would be difficult to imagine a better illustration of the late-nineteenth century mind set.

The *Jeweler's Circular* magazine of May 16, 1900 summarized the purpose of the silver: "In all respects the service is one calculated to please the gallant sailor folk for whom it is intended and to reflect credit on the state." (One wonders if the gallant sailors detailed to polish the set fully

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*The presentation plaque made originally for the first Wisconsin. Some of the metal used came from Spanish cruisers captured during the Battle of Santiago. (Photo by Greg Vick)*

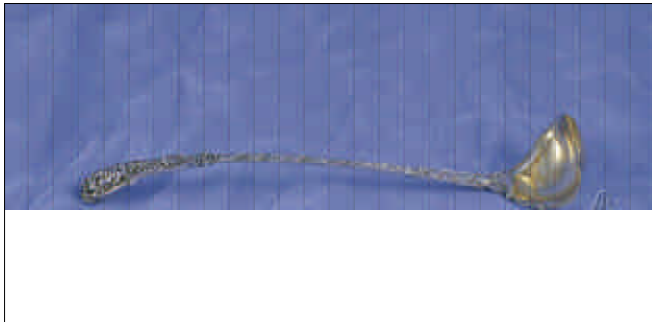
1910. The museum's new permanent exhibit for 2002 features the silver service of two battleships, USS *Wisconsin* (BB-9) and USS *Wisconsin* (BB-64).

The first *Wisconsin* (BB-9) was built in San Francisco and commissioned in February 1901. In 1899, while *Wisconsin*

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appreciated the sentiment.) The set featured two punch bowls, one large and one small. The *Jeweler's Circular* noted that these bowls were considerable vessels that should quench the thirst of the ship's officers. Two large trays, a pair of candelabra, 24 punch cups, a fruit dish, a compote and an elaborate centerpiece complete this set. The larger pieces reflect the symbols of the state of Wisconsin by using ornamental figures such as pinecones, branches, sheaves of wheat and badgers. The designers also added nautical symbols such as dolphins and seashells and even the head of King Neptune.

The set was used for formal receptions on board the battleship from 1901 until the ship's decommissioning in 1920. After the first *Wisconsin* passed from the scene, the



Punch ladle (Photo by Greg Vick)

silver was used aboard the aircraft carrier *Yorktown* (CV-10), which did not possess a service of her own. At some point (probably at the beginning of World War II) the service was removed from *Yorktown* and placed in storage in San Diego.

Battleship design proceeded apace throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, culminating in the ultimate "fast battleships" of the *Iowa* class. The third of these magnificent ships to be laid down was USS *Wisconsin* (BB-64), the second ship to bear the name of the Badger state. As in 1899, in 1943 the state legislature desired to furnish the ship with a silver service. The legislature appropriated \$7,500 for the refurbishment of the 1899 set, and for some additional pieces. Again, a Milwaukee jeweler (Schwanke-Kasten) was awarded the contract and again this local firm sub-contracted with the Gorham Company to do the actual work.

A few pieces from the old set had to be replaced (a ladle, a punch cup and four centerpiece "branches"). Fortunately, Gorham had the original casting patterns

from the 1899 set. More significant was the decision to add a tea and coffee service, consisting of a coffee pot, a teapot, a hot water kettle, a sugar bowl, a cream pitcher, a waste bowl and a tray.

The silver was not placed on the battleship immediately, due to the war. Instead it was placed on exhibit in various venues in Wisconsin until October 26, 1945, when members of the state committee traveled to San Francisco to present the silver to the battleship. Captain Roper accepted it while a band played "On Wisconsin."

When the battleship was decommissioned in 1948, the service went back to Wisconsin for the state centennial celebration. It then was returned to the Navy for a second period of service aboard an aircraft carrier, this time USS *Coral Sea* (CV-43).

When BB-64 came back to active duty in 1951 and the silver was reassigned to the battleship, where it remained until the second decommissioning in 1958. At that time, the service went on exhibit at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin in Madison,

from whence it emerged for official state functions.

The reactivation of the *Wisconsin* in 1988 called the silver back into active duty also. The ship had a special display case constructed for the wardroom to hold the silver. At the third decommissioning in 1991 the service, no doubt somewhat weary with travel, was sent back the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

In 1998 the Hampton Roads Naval Museum began work on the interpretation of the *Wisconsin* as an historic artifact, with a view toward opening the ship for public visitation in the year 2001. As part of this assignment, museum staff began to assemble collections that might bring the battleship to life. Many visitors and other interested parties asked about the ship's silver. Like the chest of gold on a pirate ship, everyone had heard of the silver. Everyone wanted to know if it could be brought to Norfolk.

Commander, Naval Supply Systems Command manages the Navy's collection of presentation silver. Museum staff contacted that command in September, 2000, and



Tea service (Photo by Greg Vick)

began the process of securing permissions to borrow the silver. The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, for so many years the guardian of the set, graciously agreed to transfer the silver to Virginia, a prerequisite to obtaining official Navy permission. In July 2001 the silver was packed by a Fine Arts shipper and arrived in its new home, the Hampton Roads Naval Museum.

The museum's exhibit will emphasize the Navy's view of presentation silver, found in the sea service's instruction for treatment of the pieces: "Presentation silver and gold presents us with a vast number of time capsules, each representing a unique exchange and many with a fascinating tale to tell. The circumstances surrounding each presentation piece provoke our curiosity and raise questions about specific people, places and events that beg to be answered. Presentation silver is considered to be 'priceless' and many of the skills used in creating it are a 'lost art' and of irreplaceable artistic expression."

*Editor's Note: Much of the information for this article was found in an extremely useful and detailed article, "The USS Wisconsin Silver Service," by Anne Woohouse, Curator of Decorative Arts, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, printed in USS Wisconsin: A History of Two Battleships (1988, State Historical Society of Wisconsin). Additional information was provided by the original research efforts of Ms. Sherry Langrock of Woodside, California, who is researching Navy presentation silver for future publication. We would also like to thank Greg Vick for allowing us to publish his photographs of the silver.*

